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Decent Work in
Garment Supply
Chains Asia

► Moving the needle: Gender equality and decent work in Asia's garment sector

Executive summary and recommendations

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► Sector overview: Uncertain future for women workers

Before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, the combined garment, textiles and footwear (GTF) industry in Asia and the Pacific had an export value of US\$601 billion, representing 60 per cent of the value of the industry globally (ILO 2019g).

In 2019, the region employed an estimated 65 million garment sector workers, including both those in formal employment and informal employment, accounting for 75 per cent of GTF workers worldwide and a significant proportion of an estimated 453 million jobs related to global supply chains (ILO, Better Work and Cornell University 2020; ILO 2016b). Within the region, GTF employment accounted for 3–4 per cent of total employment, compared with an employment share of 1.6 per cent in other regions (ILO, Better Work and Cornell University 2020).

In recent decades across the region, the sector has developed around a model based on low-cost, low-skilled, largely female labour for markets mainly in the United States of America, Europe and Japan; although China is now emerging as the world's largest market for garments. Globally, it is estimated that about 80 per cent of garment sector workers are women (Better Work 2019c). In total, 35 million women work in Asia and the Pacific's GTF sector (ILO, Better Work and Cornell University 2020). Among Asian countries, only in India and Pakistan are majority of garment workers male, although in recent years the proportion of women workers had been growing. The GTF sector furthermore indirectly supports millions of others in families, communities and related businesses far beyond the centres where garment factories are located.

Considerable debate in recent decades, including among feminist researchers, has focused on the balance in garment export-manufacturing between positive impacts and the impacts of decent work deficits associated with lower quality formal employment have on the status of women:

- The positive aspects most often highlighted include the opportunities provided for women in situations where there is no social safety net, and where the main informal work alternatives offer far worse prospects. Associated with garment sector employment are improvements in social and financial autonomy (Kabeer 2004), together with access to labour protections and paid benefits (for example maternity leave) that come with formal employment – albeit often with highly variable levels of enforcement. However, for workers to choose their employment freely, to develop their potential to the fullest and to reap the economic rewards they deserve, equality and non-discrimination must be respected (ILO 2019a).
- The well-documented decent work deficits for women workers in the garment sector (which vary from country to country) include:
 - low pay and gender pay gaps (despite increases in minimum wage levels and government commitments to pay equity in recent years);
 - long hours;
 - systemic discrimination (including on the grounds of pregnancy);
 - a lack of policies and programmes to adequately address the double burden of paid and unpaid work carried out mainly by women;

- gender-based violence¹ and harassment;
- limited opportunities for skills development and career advancement; and
- barriers to participation in leadership and decision-making at all levels.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of the global economy, which severely affected garment supply chains worldwide, future prospects for women in the sector are currently uncertain. The typical garment sector worker in Asia lost out on at least two to four weeks of work early in the pandemic, with only three in five workers being called back to the factory (ILO, Better Work and Cornell University 2020). It is estimated that millions of garment sector jobs were lost due to the disruptions. Millions more may follow in a second wave of job losses as global brands seek further price cuts, reduce orders and delay payments to suppliers (Anner 2020).

The pandemic has further intensified gender disparities and dynamics in the sector in Asia (ILO, Better Work and Cornell University 2020). Given their concentration in low-skilled and low-paid jobs, women in the garment sector are disproportionately affected by job losses due to COVID-19. They have also faced increased responsibilities for unpaid care work in the household, high levels of stress, increased gender-based violence, increased poverty, and higher levels of indebtedness incurred to support families deprived of income. Due to the scarcity of work within the wider economy as a result of the pandemic, women in the sector also face the possibility of formal garment sector jobs being taken up by men.

One important consideration in this context is the pandemic's potential acceleration of longer-term impacts on any sector restructuring and technological upgrading, including digitalization and automation (ILO 2020g). To the extent that such developments occur in the Asian context, a key issue that emerges is the relationship between technological development and potential trends towards workforce defeminization. Indeed, ILO research suggests a relationship between technological advance and defeminization of the garment sector workforce due to their concentration in lower-skilled, lower-paid jobs and tasks. (Kucera and Tejani 2014).

As sector actors look ahead to the pandemic recovery period, stakeholder input in preparing this paper indicated that women's voice and representation are to date largely absent from relevant decision-making and social dialogue processes. This is unsurprising, in light of the already prevalent underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles within trade unions, employers' organizations, factory management and other sectoral and world of work institutions. Findings of a more general CARE International (2020a) survey of 30 countries, combined with the organization's on-the-ground experience and evidence base, further indicated that most national committees established to respond to COVID-19 do not have equal female–male representation.

The consequence of such lack of voice and representation is that the particular priorities and needs of millions of women workers in the garment sector (and beyond) are not being heard where decisions are being made, and this will have a bearing on their lives. This situation links to factors such as the influence of discriminatory social norms that exclude women from decision-making and the time poverty experienced by most women as a result of disproportionate unpaid care work burdens.

The preceding critical gender challenges in the Asia garment industry will likely be further exacerbated by the anticipated impacts of the accelerating climate crisis. Three interconnected dimensions are

¹ Violence against women was defined in 1993 by the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". The Declaration states that such violence encompasses "sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere" (Cruz and Klinger 2011).



highlighted with respect to environmental sustainability and climate change, their intersection with gender, and the future of the garment industry in the post COVID-19 era:

- ▶ First, climate change will likely have increasing actual and potential impacts on the industry and its predominantly female workforce. Heat stress, for example, is already taking a toll across the region on the health and welfare of women workers, their families and communities, among other things adding to women's unpaid care work burdens (ILO 2019i).
- ▶ Second, the industry itself – one of the most polluting on the planet – will have an impact on climate change and the environment as both a major source of global emissions and an important consumer and contaminator of often-fragile water resources.
- ▶ Third, the fashion industry's global "fast fashion/throw away culture" exerts unsustainable pressures on the environment, including that of unnecessary waste. Recent studies have found that an increasing proportion of European and North American consumers see sustainability of the products they buy as an important factor in purchasing decisions (Granskog et al. 2020).

At the same time, a number of barriers to change have presented themselves. First and foremost has been the power dynamics of the sector's brand-driven pricing, purchasing and contracting model. The incentives throughout the sector are structured in a way that creates a "race to the bottom" characterized by low wage levels, thin margins, large "off-the-radar" informal and vulnerable sub-contracted workforces, and generally low levels of awareness among consumers of the real costs of the garments

they purchase (high-profile consumer campaigns in Western markets notwithstanding).

The COVID-19 pandemic has likely intensified such dynamics. At the same time, however, it has presented new opportunities within the sector for promoting positive changes in the status of women. At a broader level, this message is highlighted in the global COVID-19 Call to Action in the Global Garment Industry, which was developed by the International Organisation of Employers, the International Trade Union Confederation and IndustriALL Global Union, and coordinated by the ILO (ILO 2020d). Alongside other global frameworks relevant to the future of the global garment sector, this agreement provides an additional framework for multi-stakeholder engagement in both mitigating the impacts of the pandemic and – through the establishment, among other things, of sustainable systems of social protection – providing the building blocks for a more just and resilient garment industry (ILO 2020e).

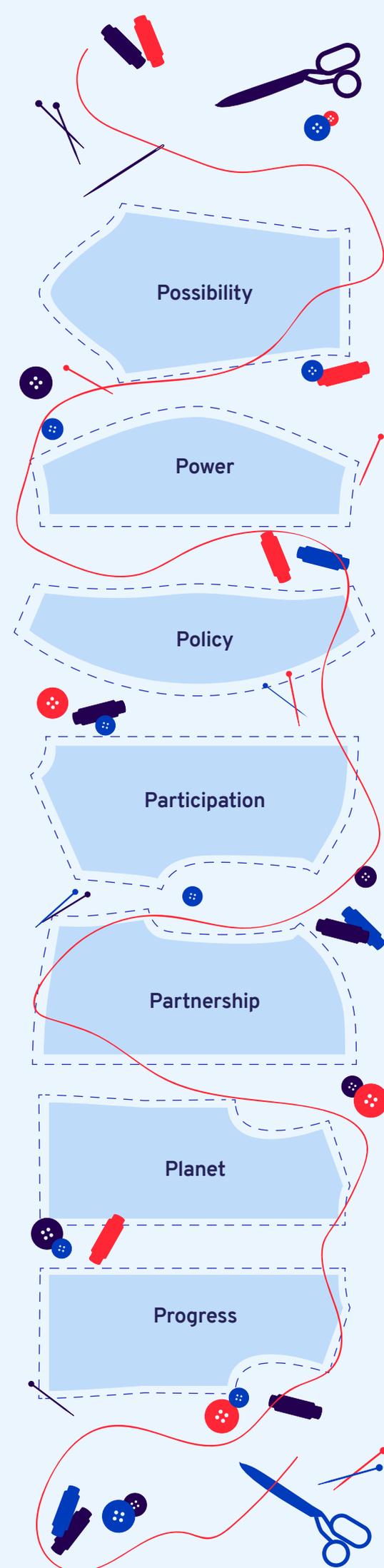
► Generating momentum for sector change: Key messages

Since the 1970s, the growth of the for-export garment sector in Asia has been accompanied by an increasingly diverse array of initiatives to address the deep-rooted manifestations of gender inequality and lack of sustainability around which the industry has been structured.

Drawing on an analysis of developments in the region, as well as interviews conducted with selected stakeholders, this paper identifies several key messages in support of intensified action and synergies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment within garment sector supply chains in Asia. These fall into seven key "P" themes: possibility (for change), power, participation, partnership, planet, policy and progress.

Possibility

As stated in the aforementioned Call to Action in the Global Garment Industry, the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic presents a rare opportunity to promote a transformative agenda that can realize a future of work in the global garment sector that supports sustainable economic,



social and environmental development. Gender equality and environmental sustainability must be central in this context, both as key drivers for change and as outcomes in their own right. At the same time, realizing this possibility must also acknowledge the other six key messages below, each of them critical to effective strategies and actions for change.

Power

The pandemic has highlighted the power differentials within the garment sector between brands and suppliers, workers and employers, and women and men. Much commentary in this context has highlighted the ways in which the overall balance of power under the current sector model ultimately favours international brands and buyers. Meanwhile the suppliers and predominantly female workforce in the sector, their families and their communities carry the major burden of job and income losses. The need to rebalance power dynamics has been highlighted by many stakeholders as essential to ensuring a more sustainable sector that is resilient, equitable and productive – and that brings shared prosperity for all. A key driver for such a shift is increasing the voice, representation and leadership of women within companies, employers' and workers' organizations, and social dialogue processes in the sector.

Policy

An essential cornerstone for transformative change in the garment sector is ensuring that effective, relevant and evidence-based public policy frameworks are in place at the global, regional and national levels. At the national level, these policies should be underpinned by government commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), international human rights frameworks, international labour standards and international environmental commitments. Relevant policy areas range from labour rights and gender equality to trade agreements, social protection and gender-responsive social infrastructure investments. A lack of systematic, comparable, gender-sensitive and sex-disaggregated sector data presents a major impediment to effective policy development in this context, including with respect to the key thematic areas discussed in this paper.

Participation

Critical to transforming the position of women workers across the garment sector in Asia within the new post-COVID-19 "normal" is ensuring that women's voice, representation and leadership lie at the heart of dialogue, policy development and decision-making in future strategies and plans. Priority must be extended to policies and measures that accelerate the movement of qualified women into leadership roles at all levels of the industry. Also vital to transformative change is ensuring intersectionality in policy and practice between gender and other forms of discrimination, including race, disability, indigenous status, ethnicity, migration status, age, family status, HIV status and sexual orientation. Ensuring representation of the needs and perspectives of the most marginalized workers in the sector in the decision-making process is critical to ensuring that nobody is left behind.

Partnership

Several factors stand out as being central to effective partnerships between sector actors for gender equality and women's empowerment. These include shared interests and purpose; inclusion (governments, buyers, suppliers and workers, among others); power sharing; and an orientation towards "win-win" outcomes. Gender-inclusive social dialogue and tripartism are proven key vehicles for the development of such partnerships, with collective bargaining at the enterprise and sector levels being a key element of such interactions. Critical to "moving the needle" in this context is women engaging collectively – as well as with their male peers – through workers' and employers' organizations, women's

organizations and networks, consumer associations, international campaigns and myriad other organizational forms across the sector.

Planet

Many women workers already bear the brunt of climate change impacts such as increased workplace temperatures and disruptions due to extreme weather events. For them, the links between gender equality, labour rights, climate change and environmental sustainability are an everyday reality. The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to leverage such links and synergies to accelerate efforts towards greater environmental sustainability within textile and garment production. Such efforts should be guided by “just transition” principles, and aim to reduce the sector’s environmental footprint by such means as greening production and employment at all levels, while also contributing to increased resilience, equity and productivity within the sector (ILO 2015b).

Progress

In the end, action is what counts in “moving the needle” towards more resilient, equitable and productive garment supply chains across the region. Positive change will only come with bold and decisive actions underpinned by clarity of shared vision and policy, inclusive participation and partnership. The International Working Group of the Garment Industry, established under the Call to Action in the Global Garment Industry, provides an important reference point in this respect. Even in the midst of the setbacks and challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing and leveraging existing good practices, experience and lessons across the region will be a key contributor in strengthening the impact of change initiatives and maintaining momentum for systemic change.²

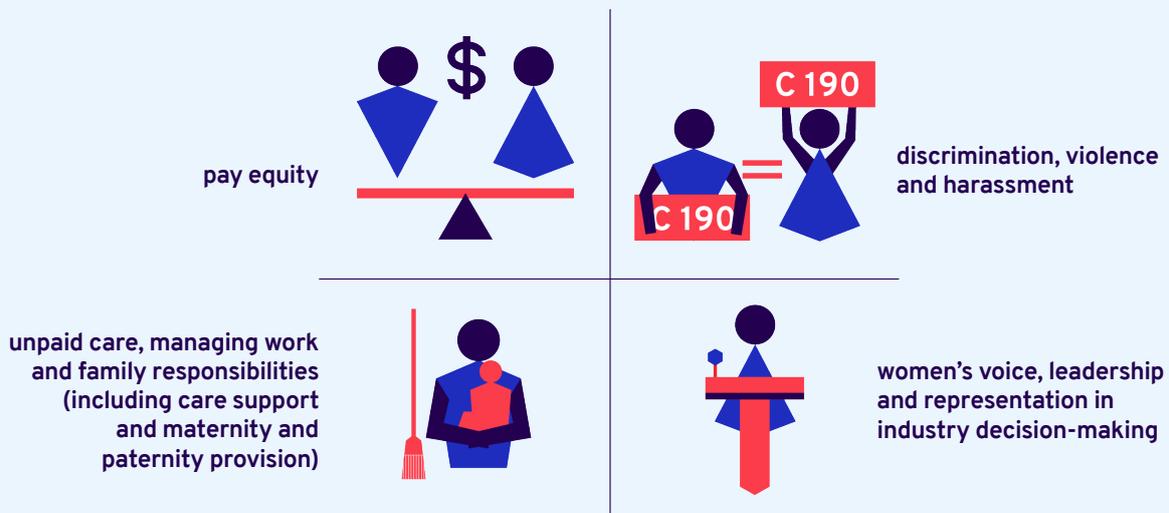
► Looking ahead: Strategies for change

“[T]ransformation will not happen organically or by tentative and disjointed steps,” suggests the landmark ILO (2019a) report *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All*. Drawing on this perspective, a theory of change is proposed to guide stakeholder cooperation and actions across the region in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment within the garment sector in ways that synergize with efforts to respond to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to this theory of change are the following:

- achievement of pay equity in the sector;
- an end to discrimination, harassment and violence;
- a rebalancing of responsibilities for unpaid care work; and
- achievement of equal voice, representation and leadership by women at all levels of the sector.

The recommendations outlined below are further proposed for joint stakeholder action to take advantage of opportunities created by the pandemic to reshape and reposition the sector for a more sustainable future, one that is resilient, equitable and productive.

² A forthcoming ILO publication that will accompany this report describes several good practice case studies of working for gender equality and women’s empowerment in garment supply chains in Asia.



► Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to provide a basis for joint stakeholder dialogue and action at regional and national levels within Asian garment supply chains. Highly interdependent and mutually reinforcing, they seek to: (i) support action by governments, employers, workers, NGOs international agencies and other actors, both collectively and in their own right; and (ii) accommodate national diversity and build on the many and diverse existing initiatives already underway across the region.

The recommendations further inform a complementary Road Map published in parallel to this report: see ILO, [Regional Road Map – Moving the Needle: Gender Equality and Decent Work in Asia's Garment Sector](#) (2021). The Road Map provides a more detailed framework for multi-stakeholder dialogue and joint action to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment within the region's garment sector.

Prioritize and promote joint stakeholder actions at all levels of the sector to continue addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, while simultaneously improving gender equality in the garment sector in Asia in the longer term.

- Leverage the global garment sector ILO's COVID-19 Call to Action in the Global Garment Industry as a key framework for joint efforts in this regard, especially in those Asian countries initially prioritized by the International Working Group set up to promote and coordinate the Call to Action³. Link implementation of the Call to Action with other existing international platforms and agreements that support change in global and regional supply chains.⁴

³ These countries are: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Pakistan.

⁴ These include the:

- ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work;
- ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization;
- ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work;
- Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (MNE Declaration);
- UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises;
- OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains in the Garment & Footwear Sector; and
- United Nations (UN) Framework for the Immediate Socio-economic Response to COVID-19.

- ▶ Promote and implement policies, strategies and measures to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment commitments constitute a central element of the COVID-19 response and recovery in both formal and informal aspects of the sector.
- ▶ Ensure that purchasing practices that affect the wages and working conditions of women in the sector are also addressed as part of multi-stakeholder sector reform dialogue and initiatives.
- ▶ Strengthen the capacity of world of work institutions to take concrete actions and advance gender equality in the garment sector.

Prioritize attention to the achievement of equal pay for work of equal value across the garment sector in line with the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100).

- ▶ Strengthen, monitor and enforce national policies and laws on equal pay for work of equal value, as well as minimum wage levels, in line with international commitments and guidance from international labour standards.
- ▶ Ensure women's voices, representation and leadership are central to all initiatives and social dialogue concerning gender pay equity and minimum wage levels. Prioritize women-intensive sectors for attention in national minimum wage level negotiations.
- ▶ At the company/employer level, review and adjust wage and salary systems to ensure use of gender-neutral job evaluations to identify "work of equal value".

Prioritize, develop and support policies, strategies and measures to increase women's voice, representation and leadership in all aspects of the garment sector.

- ▶ Promote, strengthen and implement existing national policies, laws, strategies and plans on promoting women in leadership and management at all levels, including in business (for example, national quota provisions, where they exist).
- ▶ Initiate and promote policies and measures to promote women's voice, representation and leadership social dialogue processes at all levels of the sector (from national to enterprise), including COVID-19 response and recovery and collective bargaining.
- ▶ Establish policies and measures to increase the number and participation of women in leadership and management roles within employers' and workers' organizations in the sector, including through establishing gender quotas or targets and providing leadership development opportunities, mentorships and sponsorships for women.
- ▶ Initiate and support measures to increase the number and participation of women in workplace leadership, management, supervision and bipartite committee roles. In this context, address barriers that constrain women's voice, representation and leadership, including the influence of discriminatory social norms, lack of quality and affordable childcare, violence and harassment, and lack of skills development opportunities.
- ▶ Promote positive role models of women in leadership and management in the garment sector as well as in the economy as a whole.

Prioritize, develop and support policies, strategies and measures to eradicate violence and harassment within the garment sector, including gender-based violence, in line with the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention and Recommendation, 2019 (No. 190 and No. 206, respectively).

- Prioritize the promotion, implementation and ratification of Convention No. 190 and its accompanying Recommendation No. 206 as a central focus for multi-stakeholder advocacy and action within the sector, linking with initiatives to this end in wider society.
- Ensure the promotion and application within the sector of existing national policies, laws and strategies on gender equality, gender-based violence and women's health and wellbeing, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Ensure that women's voice, representation and leadership are at the centre of all sector decision-making and social dialogue on policies and measures concerning violence and harassment, including gender-based violence.
- Ensure employers' organizations and workers' organizations are aware of and contribute to implementation of international commitments and national policies and laws to eradicate violence and harassment, including gender-based violence, in the world of work.
- Through social dialogue processes involving employers and workers, establish enterprise policies, procedures, safe complaints mechanisms, workplace committees, training programmes for managers and supervisors, and worker awareness programmes to eradicate violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence, in line with Convention No. 190 and Recommendation No. 206.

Prioritize attention to the recognition, reduction and redistribution of the disproportionate unpaid care work responsibilities carried by women in the garment sector, in line with the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156), and the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183):⁵

- Promote education and public awareness-raising to challenge and shift discriminatory social norms regarding the roles of women and men with respect to unpaid care work.
- Encourage and promote the engagement of men in unpaid care work.
- Develop policies, strategies, measures and investments for quality care services and decent care work at workplace and community levels, using tripartite dialogue and involving women workers.
- Expand and increase collectively financed maternity rights and protection, as well as parental and paternity leave, in line with international labour standards.
- Link such initiatives with the COVID-19 Call to Action in the Global Garment Industry and other efforts to expand social protection policy and coverage to address the needs of women, especially those in informal and vulnerable situations exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵ The full set of ILO policies and measures with respect to gender equality around unpaid care work is set out under the ILO 5R Framework for Decent Care Work. The 5Rs are: **recognize, reduce and redistribute** unpaid care work; **reward** paid care work, by promoting more and decent work for care workers; and guarantee care workers' **representation**, social dialogue and collective bargaining. The 5R-related policies and measures are guided by international labour standards (ILO 2018a).

Prioritize, promote and practice gender-inclusive social dialogue at all levels, including within the workplace.

- Ensure that gender inclusion is real, substantive and premised on systematic, trackable and accountable measures to achieve equality in voice, representation and leadership.

Accelerate efforts to ratify, implement and monitor international labour Conventions and Recommendations that have a particular bearing on gender inequalities in the world of work.

- Leverage such Conventions – and associated ratification efforts and campaigns – to prioritize and promote policies and measures that contribute to gender equality and the application of international labour standards in Asia's garment sector supply chains.

Ensure that gender equality dimensions are mainstreamed into garment sector policies, strategies, plans and initiatives at all levels to strengthen environmental sustainability and address the impacts of climate change (for example, the promotion of green jobs and skills and investment in the greening of production processes).

- Similarly, ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment policies, strategies, plans and initiatives at all levels take account of environmental sustainability and climate change considerations. These include the impacts on women workers' health and well-being, as well as productivity, stemming from developments such as (i) increased workplace temperatures; and (ii) the greater intensity and regularity of extreme weather events.

Increase the overall impact of the various stakeholder campaigns, programmes and projects promoting gender equality in the garment sector across the region by: (1) seeking joint initiatives where possible; and (2) sharing knowledge, experience, lessons and good practices for wider benefit and impact.

- Encourage, facilitate and support active collaboration at regional, subregional and national levels between actors working on gender equality in the sector – including through multi-stakeholder platforms where relevant – to amplify impact, enhance regular communications and ensure the efficient use of available resources.
- Take advantage of the regional online knowledge hub established by the ILO Decent Work in the Garment Sector Supply Chain in Asia project to disseminate information, research and analysis, evaluation findings, lessons and good practices.

Strengthen the systematic collection, use and dissemination of up-to-date, comparable, sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data to inform the development of policies, measures and social dialogue processes to enhance gender equality and women's empowerment within garment sector supply chains in Asia. Specific measures should include:

- More regular labour force surveys in garment producing countries where this is not yet the case.

- ▶ More regular time-use surveys to gather data on the gender dynamics of unpaid work, including as part of labour force surveys,⁶ in line with resolutions of the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (2013).⁷
- ▶ Improved collection, analysis and availability of data on trends, issues and policy options related to pay equity; discrimination, violence and harassment; unpaid care work and women's voice, leadership and representation in sector decision-making.
- ▶ The development of a multi-stakeholder plan to: (1) map key data gaps; and (2) strengthen and support the coordination of governmental, private sector, trade union and other relevant statistical efforts to this end, including in the above areas.

This is the executive summary and recommendations from 'Moving the needle: Gender equality and decent work in Asia's garment sector'. Please see [full report](#)⁸, available on the ILO's website, for further detail.

6 The ILO is exploring the potential for using time-use methods that could be attached to labour force surveys in a modular format to enable regular collection of time-spent in unpaid productive activities as a complement to national time-use surveys (ILO, n.d. e)

7 The 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2013 is widely regarded as a ground-breaking event. The Conference adopted five resolutions concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization; further work on forced labour, cooperatives and labour migration; and the functioning of the Conference (ILO, n.d.-f).

8 https://ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_789822/lang--en/index.htm.